DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 118 667 UD 015 691

AUTHOR Lee, Don Chang
TITLE Korean Family Organization in the United States: Role and Value Conflicts in a Foreign Culture.
PUB DATE Nov 74
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting (Mexico City, Mexico, November 19-24, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Acculturation; Anthropology; *Culture Conflict; Family Characteristics; *Family Problems; Family Relationship; Family Structure; *Korean Americans; Parent Child Relationship; *Role Conflict; Social Change; Stress Variables; Urban Population; Values
IDENTIFIERS Georgia (Atlanta)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Korean families with traditional family back grounds adjust to a foreign culture and maintain the family structure in a cultural system where roles, values, and living conditions are quite different from those in Korean setting. Two major relationships are analyzed: that between wife and husband, and that between parents and children. The data for this analysis were gathered through interviewing 40 Korean families living in the Atlanta area. A separate interview with wife and husband was carried out, and the families were chosen according to occupational categories. Findings indicate that shifting of the family structure from an independent type to a joint type system seems to create role conflicts between the Korean wife and Korean husband. In the joint type, wife and husband are involved together in socio-economic activities. Furthermore, living in two cultural worlds creates a state of anomie where wife and husband do not have clear-cut expectations of each other. Communication problems in English, inability to drive by wives, differences in socio-ecological systems, degrees of acculturation by both wife and husband, stress caused by living in a foreign culture, and limited social interaction seemed to be sources of conflict for Korean families in the U.S. (Author/JM)

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KOREAN FAMILY ORGANIZATION IN THE UNITED STATES: ROLE AND VALUE CONFLICTS IN A FOREIGN CULTURE

Don Chang Lee

Georgia Southwestern College

Prepared for presentation at the 73rd Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Mexico City, November 19-24, 1974.

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INTRODUCTION

Korean family organization is based on the teachings of Confucius (551-478 B.C.) who was a practical man as well as a philosopher in China. His idea was to conserve the best of the past. Therefore, he centered his writings on concepts of personal virture related chiefly to the family members. Confucius constructed his social thought around five human relationships, four of which are related to the family: (1) between father and son, (2) between husband and wife, (3) between brother and brother, (4) between members of one family and of another family, and (5) between King and subject (Bogardus 1968:56).[1]

A drastic change in the traditional family structure in Korea was brought about by the sudden flow of American culture into Korea after 1950. The Korean war brought many American soldiers and civilians into Korea, and for the first time in history, the Korean people soon had an extensive, direct, and massive contact with American people and their culture. As the result of an intensive interaction between Korea and the United States, many Koreans were able to come to the United States as students, businessmen and professional workers. According to one source (Kim 1974), 57,129 Koreans were reported as emigrants during the 1950-1971 period.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Korean families with traditional family backgrounds adjust to a foreign culture and maintain the family structure in a culture system where roles, values and living conditions are quite different from the Korean setting. The author attempted to analyze two major relationships: between wife and husband, and between parents and children.

The data for this analysis were gathered through interviewing forty Korean families living in the Atlanta area. A separate interview with wife and husband was carried out, and the families were chosen according to occupational catagories: (1) student families, (2) businessman families, and (3) professional worker families. There were approximately thirteen families each. The sample had the following background characteristics: husbands were approximately 34 years of age, wives were 30 years of age; husbands generally had an M.A. degree, wives generally had a B.A. degree; husbands had been in the United States approximately four years, wives had resided in the United States five years; the family size was approximately 3.7 and the mean family income was $11,600.00.

FINDINGS

Relationship Between Husband and Wife

Bott (1957:53) defines three types of familial activities: (1) complementary, (2) independent, and (3) joint. In complementary organization the activities of husband and wife are different and separate but fitted together to the family as a whole. In independent organization activities are carried out separately by husband and wife without reference to each other. In joint organization activities are carried out by husband and wife together, or the same activities are carried out by either partner at different times.

Korean family structure in Korea is independent where the wife has little knowledge of the husband's activities outside of the home,

and she is not expected to know about them. However, Korean family organization in the United States has little to do with independent type of organization, but is more centered upon joint organization. Husband and wife expect to carry out many activities together with a minimum differentiation of role and interest. They plan family affairs together and exchange many roles at home and elsewhere, and spend most of their leisure time together.

The conflict between wife and husband seems to arise because there is no clear cut role differentiation between wife and husband. Both the wife and husband perform the roles as provider, driver, cook, baby sitter, shopper, etc. In Korea, there is a clear cut distinction of certain roles which wives play and do not play, and which husbands play and do not play. The roles of driver, cook, baby sitter and shopper were never performed by the husband in Korea. Driving is done by professional drivers, cooking is done by the wife or housemaid and baby sitting is done by females not by adult males. Playing unexpected or new roles is more burdensome than playing those that are strict but expected, and the situation may create conflicts between husband and wife, and parents and children, because they are confronted with incompatible expectations (Gross 1966:287-288).

According to the findings in this study, problems between husband and wife seem to occur for the following reasons: (1) for the husband, attending to shopping, a time consuming activity; no dominance of husband; hard work by wife because of no housemaid; difference in interest, such as choice of TV program, sports, etc.; too much interference

by wife; and, monotonous living. (2) For the wife, shopping is always hurried; husband expects things to be the same as in Korea; too much work by wife because of no housemaid; difference in interest, such as choice of TV program, sports, etc.; limited mobility because of being unable to drive; and, monotonous living.

The above problems seem to arise because of living in a new culture. The problems both sexes recognize are closely related to each other. Korean families in America have limited social interactions, and thus most of the time is spent with family members. The living pattern is repetitive and there is no activity to refresh the mind except for family picnics or group gatherings a few times a year. In addition, Koreans, as a minority group in the United States, face communication problems and psychological stresses which result from anxiety to succeed in school work, business, and professions.

Internal problems are always related to external problems or vice-versa. The problems husbands face with wives in terms of shopping being so time consuming is both internal, external, and cultural. It is expected by the Korean husband that shopping is the wife's business. On the other hand, this problem is also related to the wife's ability to drive and communicate in English. According to this survey, more than 50% of Korean wives are not able to drive and communicate in English.

The complaint of the husband that he has no dominance over his wife and the complaint by the wife that her husband expects the same as in Korea are complementary problems. In Korea, wives are not

involved in their husbands' affairs, and housework is performed by wives, and husbands do not pay attention to domestic matters if they are trivial. However, in the United States, domestic affairs cannot be solved by wives alone and they need help from husbands. On the other hand, husbands alone cannot solve external problems because wives are involved as long as they are socio-economic matters. Therefore, any decision making is done jointly. In this respect, the husband feels no dominance over his wife, but often they expect their wives to behave as if they were in Korea. To be brief, the husband expects his wife to maintain the roles and attitudes she had in Korea, i.e., to accept his opinions on decisions. Structurally, however, this is impossible because the husband-wife relationship in the United States is different from that found in Korea.

It is more difficult for Korean women to live in the United States than for Korean males. Although husbands help their wives in many ways, wives still have to overcome hardships which they would not face if they were in Korea. Having a job, no housemaid, children's discipline, house cleaning, etc., makes wives tired and when husbands and wives are mutually tired, it is likely to create problems.

The cause of problems between husband and wife can be classified into the following categories: (1) socio-cultural, (2) ecological, and (3) economical. The socio-cultural cause is derived from family organization in an American social structure, which requires husband and wife to be related closely. It also is derived from the conflict between the Korean value system and the American value system. The

choice of value system may be optional depending upon the situation the husband and wife face. The state of anomie may affect either the husband or wife. If Koreans are not a minority group and their interaction sphere is broad so that the husband and wife will be able to find their own social interaction for relieving their psychological burden such as recreation, socialization, and free communication, the problem between husband and wife may be reduced.

The ecological cause would include cross-cultural differences. For example, application of advanced technology in daily living, dispersed services provided by the community, and house structure which allows close face-to-face contact, and confines family members to the house.

The economical factor occupies an important part in the problems between husband and wife. If a family is rich enough so that the wife's work is not necessary and if they can bring someone from Korea to take care of children and housework, the problems can possibly be reduced to a great extent. However, the conflict between husband and wife may be reduced according to the extent of how much one can adjust to a different culture, that is, the degree of acculturation and assimilation. Even though problems are great, as far as this study is concerned, no case of divorce has been known.

Relationship with Parents and Children

Traditionally, Korean parents and children have different types of relationships according to age level. It may be classified as (1) period of affection, (2) period of discipline and education, and

(3) period of dutifulness. There is no clear cut distinction of the periods and some do overlap in the course of growth and development, but it generally follows the process from infant to adult. More affection is given to an infant and when a child starts to talk and behave, education and discipline begin and it continues until he or she is grown and gets married. Discipline and education of a son is more strict and there are ethical as well as academic considerations involved. However, upon marriage, somewhat indirect and less strict guidance is given to him. Marriage is the sign that one is now an adult and from this period dutifulness to parents begins and continues until the parents pass away.[2]

Through this process, children learn to become adults and to respect parents. Therefore, there was little gap in terms of value system between parents and son. At the present time, this traditional concept of parent-child relationship is still held, but the generation gap is becoming greater. Nevertheless, subordination to parents is an ethical standard and it is a social term. No son or daughter is expected to behave against their parents.

The following is a summary of the responses by Korean parents in Atlanta to a question regarding problems with children: communication problem (in English and Korean); generation gap (difference in value system, e.g., dating problem); children have too close access to adults because of house structure and lack of friends to play with; children's socialization; home education; food and clothes preference; and, no baby sitter. Both mothers and fathers gave mostly identical responses and they seem to have the same feeling toward their children.

The obvious problem with children is that of communication in Korean and English. Children tend to speak better English than their parents and many parents have had the experience of having their English corrected by their children. It has been observed by the parents that children were able to speak fluent English after being in the United States for three years or more.

Improvement of communication in English by their children brings another problem, namely that they are forgetting the Korean language and/or are unable to speak in Korean. Most parents speak Korean at home and also encourage their children to speak Korean so that they can maintain ability to speak Korean. Therefore, in most cases, the communication between parents and children is bilingual; parents in Korean and children in English.

Another important problem is that of value conflict between parents and their children. Korean parents are trying hard to teach Korean values at home but children are learning American values faster because of their association with American children at school and in the community, and they are most strongly influenced by their American teachers.

The following case study may be a good example of a value conflict between parents and children. A teenaged Korean girl being in this country for about eight years learned about dating with a boy friend. However, according to Korean tradition, dating for girls is not allowed. Her parents tried very hard to stop her from dating with an American boy, but their daughter did not listen. Furthermore, it was a matter

of shame for the parents to have other Koreans know about their daughter's dating. The conflict between parents and daughter was obvious. Her parents tried hard to convince their daughter that Korean ethics and custom would not allow her to date. At the same time, the daughter had something to say. She indicated the fact that she is living in the United States and she likes American ways and she hates the Korean way, although she realizes that she is a Korean.

The problem seems to arise from the conflict of value system as a result of culture contact. Korean children, like other oriental children in the United States, are growing up in two worlds. The clash of two cultures, represented by home on the one hand and by school and community on the other, has meant a conflict of loyalties (Simpson 1958:533).

Intimate contact with children at home seems to be a problem to parents. It is a Korean tradition that children are expected to stay away from adults. Since watching television programs is the main recreational activity for Korean parents and children, there is no way of avoiding being with the children unless there is an additional room in which children may play and watch television. Furthermore, most Korean children suffer from lack of opportunities for social interaction with other children, and thus home becomes the only place to spend their leisure time.

The problem of home education is related to the parents problem of not being able to speak good English; the parents are not able to help educate their children. Food and clothes preference would be

the result of acculturation by children. Korean children go to American schools and eat American food for breakfast and lunch; dinner is the only meal in which they eat Korean food because parents prefer Korean food for dinner. When children get used to American food at school, they come to prefer certain American foods such as hamburger, hot dogs, etc. which the parents do not like. This creates a problem between parents and children. Undoubtedly, all Koreans, both adults and children, seem to enjoy eating rice and "Kimchee."[3] The problem of clothes preference is mainly with girls who are attending secondary schools. They want to wear dresses as American girls do but sometimes parents do not allow their daughter to wear pants or skirts that are too short. This is also an indication of conflict between the young and old, the traditional value system and modern trends.

SUMMARY

Findings indicate that shifting of the family structure from an independent type to a joint type system seems to create role conflicts between the Korean wife and the Korean husband. Korean family organization in the United States is a joint type, and in this type, wife and husband are involved together in socio-economic activities. Furthermore, living in two cultural worlds creates the state of anomie where wife and husband do not have a clear cut concept of expectations from one another. Thus the role concept becomes situational depending upon advantages of one another. These problems would not occur if Koreans were not a minority group. Communication problems in English,

inability to drive by wives, differences in socio-ecological systems, degrees of acculturation by both wife and husband, stress caused by living in a foreign culture, and limited social interaction seemed to be sources of conflict for Korean families in the United States.

The relationship between children and parents is under strain because of conflicting values and the communication problems. Living in two worlds for both parents and children must be hard. The conflict between parents and children arises from the fact that children are more rapidly acculturated into American culture than their parents. The conflict would be greater when parents are retaining Korean traditional values and children are moving ahead leaving Korean values behind.

NOTES

1. The emphasis on the father-son relationship is based on the fact that Korean family system is a patriarchy, with a patrilocal post-marital residence pattern, patrilineal descent, agnate clan organization, and the inheritance of property by one or all male heirs. Therefore, in the Korean family system, men occupy a dominant position, and respect for the continuum of family lineage is an important function.

   The husband-wife relationship is temporary and its main function is to maintain the family lineage. The wife is expected to bear a son and she feels insecure in her position as a wife until she has a son. The husband is always superior to the wife and all important matters at home are decided by the husband.

   The relationship between brothers is important in Korean family structure. Mutual aid is expected and having many sons protects parents and their family members from external affairs. The eldest son has a strong obligation to support his parents and maintain the continuation of their family lineage. The eldest son is respected by the younger brothers, because of his social and ethical obligation, and he also disciplines the younger brothers.

Inasmuch as the family combination is established upon parent-son, rather than the husband and wife relationship, it is obvious that the latter has only secondary importance as compared with the former. The husband-wife relationship is maintained by the vertical custom of dominance and obedience, and not the horizontal one of equality and fraternity. The parent-son relationship lays stress on unilateral, absolute obedience on the part of the son, the relationship being that of blind submission to the authoritarian paternity.

2. A patrilocal rule of residence is practiced by Korean families, and the daughter-in-law is expected to be dutiful to her parents-in-law as well as her husband. However, upon marriage, a daughter is not expected to be dutiful to her own parents.

3. "Kimchee" is pickled cabbage with spices: salt, ground red pepper, garlic powder or chopped garlic, ground sesame seed, and green onion. It is also mixed with oysters or anchovies, and carrots. It is very hot and gives a smell most Americans would not like when it is pickled.

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